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ABSTRACT

The core curriculum concept and reasons behind the current momentum for curricular reform are examined, and the issues involved in institutionalizing new core curricular ideas are exemplified. Reform follows from changes in the character of undergraduate education toward less restrictive, more diffuse requirements in the area of general education and increased time spent in major fields of study. General education and the idea of liberal arts are discussed. Core courses are shown to be interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary, and educational goals are more concerned with learning processes than with content. Core curriculum programs at Austin College, Harvard University, Pacific Lutheran University, and Saint Joseph's College are described briefly. (SW)

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REVAMPING CORE CURRICULA

By Carol Herrnstadt Shulman

Curricular change in higher education once again is front page news. Harvard University's core curriculum proposals (1978) have focused public attention on a resurgence of curricular reform activity that seeks a new understanding of what is meant by a college education. Campus reformers differ in their approaches to this issue, but they are motivated by a common observation: curricular changes over the past ten years have so liberalized general education requirements that students often graduate without significant education in basic skills and modes of thought in areas outside their specialized interest.

These areas of learning have long been considered essential aspects of undergraduate education. Many observers agree that when a college education does not provide this general background, it shortchanges students and fails society. They contend that our rapidly changing society places a premium on people who are flexible, able to respond successfully to new conditions, and who know how to integrate different areas of knowledge to solve multifaceted problems. They believe that a general education program provides students with these capabilities.

This review looks at the reasons behind the current momentum for curricular reform, and describes efforts to promote a particular aspect of this movement: the core curriculum concept. The issues involved in institutionalizing new curricular ideas are exemplified in the core curricula arena.

Why Now?

Recent trends in undergraduate education provide the impetus for reform. Over the past decade substantial changes in the character of undergraduate general education toward less restrictive, more diffuse requirements in the area of general education have occurred. During the same interval, students have increased the amount of time spent in their major fields of concentration (Blackburn et al. 1976).

Blackburn (et al. 1976) surveyed college course requirements at 271 institutions to determine what kinds of changes in requirements had occurred between 1967 and 1974. They looked at four areas in course requirements:

- The total number of credit hours required for graduation
- The proportion of degree-credit hours represented by general education requirements, the content and structure of the general education requirements, specific general education course requirements, and distinctive patterns of general education requirements
- The proportion of degree-credit hours required in each of six selected majors
- The proportion of graduation requirements available as electives (Blackburn et al. 1976, p. 7).

They determined that undergraduate education programs have changed in the direction of allowing students more free choice in course selection. On the average, institutions require 123 semester hours of study for a bachelor's degree (a decline of only two hours since 1967). Within these limits, the general education component has declined, while the major component has remained steady; consequently, the elective portion has increased substantially. In four-year institutions, the increase has been from a maximum of 30.2 percent to 41.3 percent, and from a minimum of 16.8 to 25.5 of the total undergraduate program (Blackburn et al. 1976, p. 11).

At the same time, the structure of general education itself has changed so that students have increased choices within general education itself. In 1967, the average general education program consisted of 50 percent prescribed courses, 46 percent distribution requirements, and 4 percent free courses. By 1974, these figures had shifted to 28 percent, 54 percent, and 18 percent, respectively.

Given more options, undergraduates have not compensated for the lack of required general education courses by designing their own general education programs. Blackburn also examined student course-taking patterns at ten institutions, eight of which had substantially altered their curriculum, and two of which had not. The latter served as controls. He found that students used their free credits to bolster their training in their major concentration by either increasing the number of courses in their major or in related fields.

Consequently, specialization has become a more important factor in undergraduate education. Looking at student course-taking patterns at institutions that significantly increased their elective courses, Blackburn found that general education requirements comprised 40 percent of the undergraduate program in 1967, but only 20 percent in 1974; at the same time, depth electives increased from 16 to 28 percent, while major requirements only increased by 2 percent (28 to 30). Students at institutions with smaller elective changes did not significantly alter their course-taking patterns: general education requirements declined from 45 to 42 percent; depth electives increased from 17 to 19 percent and major requirements changed from 15 to 14 percent (Blackburn et al. 1976, p. 32).

Higher education observers fear that students are short-sighted in their desire to become specialists during their undergraduate years. When students narrowly focus their education, they lose the background they will need to understand and cope with rapidly changing demands in their personal and professional lives. Rudolph (1977) comments on this trend:

> recent events so pushed and pulled the American student toward a vocational bias that we now witness the accelerating downgrading of those aspects of an undergraduate education that encourages imagination, judgment decision, values. If the Great Depression taught students to be skeptical of specialized learning, that has not been the case in the 70's (pp. 287-288).

Second, the liberalization of choice in undergraduate education may also be a factor in changing public attitudes toward higher education. Gaff (n.d.) observes that the public is once again losing confidence in higher education: the quality of education is declining; a college degree no longer guarantees a job; and "well educated"

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leaders have plunged the nation into turmoil. He argues that general education's disarray has caused the academic community to lose its sense of purpose, thereby eroding public confidence in its abilities (see also Simmons 1979).

This public discomfort with the outcomes of general education is reflected in a report entitled *The Competent College Student* (1977), which was written to spark discussion about general education. Sponsored by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, the report notes a general dissatisfaction with liberal education and identifies "certain basic and assessable skills and understandings that [it] deem[s] indispensable regardless of one's vocation" (p. 4), which should be acquired during the undergraduate years. The study pinpoints skills in three areas: Indispensable Skills such as reading and writing; Basic Understandings such as competence in areas outside the major; and Special Attributes such as critical thinking.

National Interest

At a grassroots level, there is significant interest in responding to the current dissatisfaction with the breadth component of undergraduate education. For example, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has sponsored reform efforts in general education and core curriculum since 1976. Sponsored programs are expected to improve humanities education. As of February 1979, NEH has awarded $186,090 to forty-six colleges for developing general education programs and $199,989 to forty-eight institutions for core curriculum programs (Perkins 1979). Similarly, the Project on General Education Models (GEM), sponsored by the Society for Values in Higher Education and funded by the Exxon Education Foundation and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, seeks to develop innovative general education curricula. GEM is a consortium of fourteen institutions that will: work to develop models of general education, improve general education programs, provide professional development for faculty, and learn more about the barriers to improving general education and develop strategies for overcoming them.

The Core Curriculum

The core curriculum concept is a means for achieving, in whole or in part, an institution's general education goals. Therefore, a discussion of the general education idea needs to precede an examination of the core curriculum concept.

In its earliest form, American higher education was a liberal arts program that educated students in the origins and traditions of Western thought and civilization. In response to advances in knowledge and new social needs, colleges and universities augmented their curricula, thereby diluting the liberal arts idea. General education programs have evolved as a means to restore the liberal arts concept to the undergraduate program.

As commonly understood, the term general education refers to requirements that:

> [ensure] that all students obtain, from the many courses and programs an institution may make available, some knowledge of the ideas and culture that were once themes of the total liberal arts college (Carnegie Foundation 1977, p. 165)

Institutions may use one or more of the following approaches to achieve these objectives: (1) advanced learning skills courses; (2) "breadth" or "distribution" courses; and (3) integrative or "synoptic" courses (Carnegie Foundation 1977, p. 9, citing Phenix).

This general education model is strongly shaped by curricular concepts developed over the past forty years. Harvard University's views were particularly influential in establishing the general education concept. Writing in 1945, the committee charged with reforming Harvard's undergraduate curriculum called for a unifying concept for undergraduate education that would use the traditions of Western civilization as its foundation. Recipients of this education:

> should be able to talk with [their] fellows in other fields above the level of casual conversation. [They] should share in a common awareness of the importance of ideals and objectives, in a common understanding of the heritage which is the possession of [their] generation (*General Education* 1945, p. 192).

To serve the goals of this general education concept, core programs are content-oriented. Generally, these programs are a "common, tightly knit, yet broad and often interdisciplinary series of courses usually required of all students" (Levine 1978, p. 9).

But a shift in attitudes about the purposes of general education has occurred since 1945. Traditional core programs have become obsolete for many institutions; there is no longer a consensus about what subjects students should study. Current discussions indicate that "the term 'general education' functions like an ink blot onto which individuals project their own values, beliefs, attitudes. . . . So long as people have different philosophies of education they will necessarily have different views about what general education is . . ." (Gaff 1979, p. 2).

This lack of consensus about what constitutes general education reflects contemporary sensitivity to the impossibility of becoming knowledgeable about every area of intellectual endeavor. (Belknap and Kuhns 1977).

Current uncertainty over what is or is not essential to study finds expression in discussions on curricular reforms. These discussions focus on developing a general education curriculum that will teach students about the process of learning and provide them with the skills that they will need to conduct this process independently. The Carnegie Foundation (1977) summarizes this concept:

> perhaps the basic objectives of the curriculum will be to provide students with skills for lifelong learning. These will include the ability to analyze written and spoken ideas and exposition, to use computation tools properly, to integrate information gathered from more than one source to produce new conclusions or observations, to test the validity of conclusions, and to use knowledge to solve problems (p. 120).

One method for achieving these goals is a new concept of core curriculum. As an arm of a general education program, core courses may still be "common and tightly knit" but they need not be content oriented. Instead, these courses may focus on themes, values, problems, or essential skills that the college considers important for its graduates to confront or master. They are of necessity inter- or multidisciplinary. In this framework, the new core courses may be fluid in the materials they use, since education goals are more concerned with learning processes than with content. Therefore, each new class may use different materials to develop core curriculum issues.

This concept of core curriculum is still evolving and is not a commonplace in the higher education community as a whole. Ironically, practitioners of this approach may not recognize that they are shaping a new curricular development. For example, curricular reformers at Amherst College shy away from any appearance of dictating to their students specific areas of knowledge they must master to be considered educated individuals. They specifically reject the idea that they institute a core program that would "require a grounding in the actual content of the [core] courses" (*Education at Amherst* . . . 1978, p. 45).

But their curricula proposals are in harmony with the new core curriculum approach. They propose that freshmen take a required set of theme-oriented and multidisciplinary courses that introduce students to:

> a concept of intellectual life that stresses openness and flexibility as the essential conditions of critical reasoning . . .

> the proper function of a curriculum is . . . to create the conditions under which reason is liberated from ignorance and prejudice (p. 40).

Developing a Core Program

Students of curricular changes acknowledge that the vitality of new programs depends on the context in which they are undertaken and the process by which they are developed and implemented. This section discusses the areas that must be considered in the course of curricular reform. It draws upon core curricular programs to exemplify the issues involved.

As a precondition for successful curricula change, there must be a campus environment that will favorably consider reform efforts. Levine (1978, p. 451, citing Bressler) identified five environmental situations that motivate change: (1) a crisis threatens the existence of the institution, so new direction is needed for survival; (2) a shared self-interest in change exists; (3) a power imbalance occurs, so that one campus group forces change upon the community; (4) a structural change occurs in the environment, so that other reforms seem appropriate or necessary; and (5) reform occurs because it seems consistent with the temper of the times.

The latter reason seems to be the most compelling for many institutions now considering curricular reform. Ten years after an era of massive curricular liberalization, many educators feel a need to reexamine and redefine the concepts of undergraduate education (Simmons 1979; Pacific Lutheran n.d.). But most seem acutely aware that reform must not mean restoration: the old programs will not meet today's educational or personal needs.

Successful curricular reform begins with a reexamination of the college's educational goals: "What experiences, accomplishments, or appreciations . . . are essential for its graduates?" (Hartman 1977, n.p.). Responses to these questions establish the framework within which the planning process will occur. For example, Saint Joseph's College (Indiana) developed a core program to meet its needs as a Catholic liberal arts institution.

As a correlate to the question of institutional mission, reformers also have to consider whether proposed changes are compatible with the campus traditions and values. Curricular change has the greatest prospect for success when it does not become too disruptive or threaten the status quo; this means the character of the proposed changes should be compatible with the institution's academic practices and traditions (Levine 1978, p. 433).

Following these discussions, campus organizers need to deal with a range of issues involved in planning, developing, implementing, and institutionalizing a new curricular plan. Levine (1978, p. 433) identifies five areas that may be decisive in determining whether the curricular reforms become accepted. These areas are: (1) communication and publicity; (2) administrative leadership; (3) wide-based support; (4) rewards and resources; and (5) appropriate forms of innovative management and organization.

A key issue underlies these five areas: faculty acceptance of and active involvement in the reform effort. Positive faculty involvement seems obtainable since 44 percent of all faculty agree that their institution's curriculum needs serious reform (Levine 1978, p. 425, citing 1975-76 Carnegie surveys; see also Ladd and Lipset 1977). However, most observers also agree that for several reasons faculty pose the biggest obstacle to successful reform. First, the academic profession emphasizes a disciplinary orientation, so that most faculty are concerned with departmental rather than institution-wide curricular problems. Second, the academic reward system reinforces this orientation, giving few material rewards for curricular change efforts, but significant credit for research activities. And finally, the success of any curriculum reform depends on how committed faculty are to teaching in a new program (Levine and Weingarten 1978; Levine 1978; Carnegie Foundation 1977; Rudolph 1977). Additional work with little promise of material rewards for it may result in a teaching faculty that renders a new program lifeless.

Core curriculum programs double the problems posed by faculty acceptance since they are in a multidisciplinary mode, requiring faculty to overcome their disciplinary orientation and engage in substantial planning work without the assurance of career and financial rewards (Mayville 1978). In this context, reports from several institutions that have implemented new core curriculum programs indicate that campus-wide involvement in the process was a significant factor in their program's successful development. At Austin College (Texas), involvement was institutionalized as part of the reform process itself. With funding from several sources, Austin launched its Total Institutional Project in 1972 to revamp entirely its undergraduate curriculum, both core and departmental offerings. Most planning was conducted during Summer Resource Laboratories that engaged many students and all faculty in detailed new curriculum planning, redesigning of present programs, exchange of insights about the college's educational goals, and development of new educational strategies. Such involvement helps to insure faculty acceptance of the new curriculum and to promote its long-term success.

Similarly, Pacific Lutheran University's core curriculum program was planned to overcome traditional faculty problems. With NEH grant money, the university paid thirty-two faculty members to participate in a summer workshop to "loosen the grip of bias and expose our educational methods and goals to the judgment of our colleagues" (Huber 1977, p. 160). Team-taught mini-courses to implement the workshop concepts followed and persuaded participating faculty of the value of the interdisciplinary approach. These efforts were accompanied by campus-wide publicity on the core curriculum concept. So successful was the undertaking that after one year of planning, the faculty adopted the new core curriculum with only one dissenting vote. Previous curricular reform had taken five years to win acceptance.

Core Curriculum Programs

To establish a foundation for their proposals, curriculum reformers often describe the skills and knowledge that educated people need to cope with contemporary society. The descriptions of core curriculum programs that follow indicate considerable consensus about what students need, e.g. basic communication skills, acquaintance with different modes of intellectual inquiry, analytical skills, and sensitivity to philosophical and ethical problems, but their approaches differ considerably. The programs presented here are examples of new directions in core curriculum developments. They by no means represent all possible approaches to this topic.

Austin College—The core program includes six courses taken over two years. The courses are interrelated and designed to reflect the college's commitment to liberal education, "dealing with ideas, inquiry, serious personal involvement, exposure to one's cultural heritage, and consideration of values" (Austin College, n.d., p. 26). Planners found that freshmen particularly need assistance in making the transition from a high school to college environment. In addition, the increasing heterogeneity of the entering classes make a common freshman experience more imperative.

Harvard University—These core proposals have attracted broad public attention, and they may influence the direction of curricular reform at many liberal arts institutions. The proposed curriculum is designed to foster characteristics of a person educated to deal with contemporary social and personal needs. Desired characteristics include: (1) the ability to think and write clearly and effectively;

(2) "a critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain and apply knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and ourselves" (Faculty of Arts . . . p. 2); (3) an awareness of other cultures; (4) a confrontation with moral and ethical problems; and (5) education in depth in a specific field of knowledge.

Pacific Lutheran University—The core program consists of eight courses and one seminar and is an optional experience for undergraduates. Courses are related to each other in pairs, and reflect the core program theme, "The Dynamics of Change." Faculty in this program must have participated in preparatory interdisciplinary workshops. Topics or particular courses may change because "no single topic need be an essential or continuous component course" as long as "broad objectives of an undergraduate liberal education are met" (Huber 1977, p. 164).

Saint Joseph's College—Launched in 1969, this core program includes ten core courses distributed over four years. Its central purpose is the process of becoming a "self-worth being, of leading a genuinely human existence, [which is] the basic issue of liberal education" (Saint Joseph's College, n.d., p. 2).

Concluding Thoughts

After ten years of substantial change in undergraduate curricula, a reexamination of its purposes and directions seems appropriate; therefore, it is not surprising that the higher education community, bolstered by public support for this effort, is actively interested in curricular revision.

As institutions consider curricular change, several caveats are in order to promote significant reform. First, motivation for change must be present, so that the endeavor has wide-based support. Second, changes that occur should be compatible with institutional purposes, traditions, and available or potential resources. And finally, changes that are made should not be retreads of outmoded or already rejected curricular forms, which will be perceived as unresponsive to a student's personal and career needs.

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